

A black silhouette of a woman in a business suit, running towards the left. She is carrying a black briefcase in her right hand. The background is a solid red color.

Agatha's First Case

AN
AGATHA RAISIN
SHORT STORY

M.C. Beaton

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AGATHA'S FIRST CASE

M. C. BEATON



[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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I

Agatha Raisin had made it to Mayfair. She was twenty-six years old and for the past six months had been working as secretary to Jill Butterfrick, head of Butterfrick Personal Relations. The offices were in South Audley Street; the pay was not very good and the hours were long. But ambitious Agatha wanted to put clear water between herself and her unfortunate past, fleeing the Birmingham slum where she had been brought up, escaping her drunken parents, and walking out on a disastrous marriage to Jimmy Raisin.

She sometimes felt she should divorce Jimmy, but kept putting it off until she assumed that, like her parents, he had probably died of drink. Agatha could only afford a one-room flat in Acton. She carefully bought designer clothes in thrift shops and tried to elocute as much of her Birmingham accent out of her voice as she possibly could.

Apart from her eyes, which were small and bearlike, she presented an otherwise attractive appearance. She was slim with very long legs and shiny brown hair worn in a pageboy.

Jill was a bully and often kept Agatha late when there was no reason for it. Agatha quickly gathered that practically all the clients were “friends of Daddy,” and guessed that the inefficient Jill would otherwise probably have no clients at all. The public relations officers consisted of three languid debs who seemed to do very little.

All of the dogsbody office work was handled by Agatha. She only put up with it because she wanted to *absorb* Mayfair. Soon she would move on and, she cynically thought, have to be replaced by at least three employees.

She had previously tried to get employment with a reputable top PR agency. Agatha had thought the interview had gone well and the boss had said he would let her know. He had called in his secretary as she was leaving. Agatha paused by the secretary’s desk to check her makeup and, to her horror, heard the boss say, “That one just won’t do. Bit of a toughie. Not enough polish for us. Give it a couple of days and send her a

rejection.” Agatha had left, her face flaming with mortification. Two Agathas warred in her soul. The quivering inside Agatha wanted to give up her ambitions but warred with another Agatha, who snarled, “One day I’ll show you!”

But the life of Agatha Raisin was about to change. Jill summoned her one morning. Agatha waited politely for instructions while her inner voice said, *What, now, you nasty-faced bitch?*

Jill had a long horsey face and very large teeth. Her carefully tinted blond hair hung about her face in the latest style, which seemed to involve looking as if one had just crawled out of bed.

“We have a problem,” she said. “Have you heard of the merchant banker, Sir Bryce Teller?”

“I read about him,” said Agatha. “The papers think he’s going to be arrested for murdering his wife.”

“Yes, well, he’s a friend of daddy’s, and all that. But I have the reputation of this agency to consider. He wants us to deal with the press. Go round there—better to tell him in person—and say that in the circs, we cannot represent him. But best wishes and all that. He lives in Wigmore Street, so just trot round there. Here’s the address.”

Heart beating hard, Agatha left Jill’s office. On the road out, she snatched up a pile of the morning papers and took ten pounds out of the petty cash. “Is that authorised?” drawled a girl called Samantha.

“Wouldn’t do it otherwise,” said Agatha, and made her escape. It was a sunny July day. Agatha found a café with a table outside and ordered a sandwich and coffee. After she had finished her sandwich, she lit a cigarette and opened the newspapers and began to read everything about the murder that she could. The facts were stark. Sir Bryce had been heard shouting at his wife. His wife had been found in the morning strangled with a cheese wire that Bertha Jones, his housekeeper, said was missing from the kitchen. Bertha Jones had been given leave to visit her aunt in Dorset and his gentleman’s gentleman, Harry Bliss, had gone to the theatre, let himself in and had gone straight to bed. But a Dr. Williamson, who had a home and surgery next door, said because it was a warm night and all the windows had been opened, he had heard Sir Bryce shouting at his wife and saying he would kill her.

Sir Bryce did a lot for charity and that was where the agency had come in, publicising fund-raising balls and parties. There was a photograph of Sir Bryce and his wife, Nigella. *Trophy wife*, thought Agatha cynically.

Nigella had been willowy and blond, married for the second time at the age of thirty, while Sir Bryce was fifty-nine. His first wife had died of cancer. Agatha studied his photograph. He had silver hair and a clever face.

She gave a little sigh and decided to leave the newspapers. The day was getting hotter and she did not want to carry them all the way to Wigmore Street. As Agatha strode along in her high-heeled sandals, wearing a dull green raw silk suit she had bought in a thrift shop, she suddenly wished she were not so driven by ambition. Her secretarial skills were excellent. Why not move to a more congenial office? But Agatha had held on to two dreams. One was working in Mayfair. The other was that one day she would buy a cottage in the Cotswolds. She had visited the Cotswolds as a child on a camping holiday with her parents. They had drunk themselves silly with boredom, complaining that they should have gone to a holiday camp as usual, but the young Agatha had been enchanted by the beauty and peace of the place.

Suddenly, she was in Wigmore Street and found herself wishing she could go back to the office and lie and say Sir Bryce had not been at home. The sun flashed on the brass plates of doctors and medical specialists. Agatha wondered why such a rich merchant banker would choose to live in such an area. Surely Regents Park, Hampstead, or Mayfair would be more in keeping. She arrived outside the Edwardian townhouse. The street was quiet: hard to believe it was so close to the commercial noise and bustle of Oxford Street.

Agatha rang the brass bell and waited, hoping against hope that no one would answer. But the door was open by a man in a black suit and discreet tie. He had thinning fair hair and a boxer's face. This, thought Agatha, must be Harry Bliss, the gentleman's gentleman.

"I am from the Jill Butterfrick Agency to see Sir Bryce," said Agatha.

He stood aside to let her enter. Agatha's first impression of the town house was that it was claustrophobic. The square hall was thickly carpeted. Blinds at the long windows shut out the sunlight. Bliss led the way upstairs and into a long room with windows front and back.

"Girl from the PR agency," announced Bliss. A man who had been sitting at a desk by the far window rose slowly to his feet and turned to face Agatha. He looked much older, more crumpled, than his photographs.

Sit down," he ordered.

Agatha sat on the edge of an overstuffed armchair. The other chairs and

sofa were equally plump and had an unused look about them. The blinds were down and the windows were framed by heavy brocade-lined curtains. There was a Victorian fireplace against one wall and above it, an Empire mirror in a gold frame. Bowls of fresh flowers decorated several side tables. The wall opposite the fireplace was lined with books.

He sat in an armchair opposite her. He was wearing a well-cut tailored suit, a white shirt, and a silk tie.

“Name?” he asked.

“Agatha Raisin.”

“And you are?”

“Secretary to Jill Butterfrick.”

“Sent to tell me that her precious agency will not represent me?”

Agatha gulped. “Well, yes.”

“Would you like coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Agatha noticed a large crystal ashtray on a table next to her. She suddenly longed for a cigarette. The pair studied each other. I could be facing a murderer, thought Agatha, but he looks so kind and normal. Then the intuition that was to serve her so well in the future sparked in her brain. For some reason, she was suddenly convinced he did not do it.

“I hate this,” she burst out. She looked at him and grinned. “You know what? This is the end. I am not under contract. I am going back there and I am going to resign. Whew!”

Sir Bryce rang the bell. When Bliss appeared, he ordered coffee and said to Agatha, “You may smoke if you wish.”

He waited until Agatha had lit a cigarette and said, “Tell me about yourself.”

Agatha was about to give him a fictitious account of her happy childhood in the Cotswolds with adoring parents, but there was something in the shrewd grey eyes surveying her that stopped her. So she told the truth, every bit of it.

“So, why were you working for Jill?” he asked.

“I wanted to learn the PR business,” said Agatha. “I could be good at it. Jill hasn’t a clue. She takes me along as a dogsbody when she is entertaining journalists. I keep a private file on them all. I know their weaknesses. I know how to apply pressure.”

“You are a scary lady. Ah, here’s coffee. How do you take it?”

“Black, please,” said Agatha.

When Bliss had left, he said, "So how would you go about it?"

"Jerry Rothmore of the *Sketch* is your biggest critic," said Agatha. "I happen to know he is cheating on his wife. Jill went to powder her nose one day when we were having lunch with him. He went on as if I didn't exist. Phoning someone called Cynthia and talking sex. His wife is called Beryl. I checked. I'd start with him. I wish I were a PR. I'd soon get the vultures off your back."

Bryce looked at the pugnacious face opposite him and suddenly smiled.

He rang the bell again and when Bliss came in, said, "Tell George to get round here as fast as possible."

When Bliss had left, Bryce turned to Agatha. "George is my man of business. Do you know South Molton Street?"

"Yes," said Agatha.

"I have property there I was about to sell. An office above the shops. You may set up your own PR business and represent me. I will fund you to hire staff and advertising. If you aren't any good, I will drop you. Are you prepared to meet the challenge?"

"Oh, yes!" said Agatha, although she was hardly able to believe her ears. "But there is one thing. If I am to handle you, I need your view on your wife's murder."

"Of course you do. May I have one of your cigarettes? I'm not supposed to smoke."

Agatha rose and gave him one from her packet and then lit it for him with hands that trembled.

"Yes, I did have a row with my wife. The windows were open and that interfering doctor next door heard it all. I had been checking the accounts. She had been buying expensive things like an Oyster Rolex and yet couldn't produce it. I felt sure she was buying presents for a lover. I regretted marrying her but I was damned if I would end up in the divorce courts and pay her anything. She stormed out after I had threatened to kill her and told her I was cutting off her allowance. See how bad it looks? I went to bed. Didn't hear a thing after that. Got up in the morning, came in here and nearly tripped over her dead body. She was lying by the fireplace with a sort of garrotte around her neck. Wooden handles on the ends. Sort of thing they cut cheese with. The police have only circumstantial evidence but the doctor's evidence is pretty damning. And worst of all, I love cheese and had used the cutter that evening to slice off a bit. My prints were on the handle. Also, there was no sign of a break-in. I pointed

out that I often helped myself to a slice of cheese so it stood to reason that my prints would be on the handle and that the murderer would wear gloves, but they said that in that case the prints would be more blurred. So it looks bad.”

“That is bad,” said Agatha. “Why haven’t they arrested you?”

“Any day now. I have a good lawyer and powerful friends.”

“That’s odd,” said Agatha.

“What’s odd?”

“When someone attacked your wife and strangled her, you should have heard screams and her feet maybe thudding on the floor. Do you take sleeping pills?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell the police that?”

“No. They didn’t ask.”

“Oh, sir, really!”

“Call me Bryce.”

The doorbell had been ringing for some time. “Ignore that,” said Bryce. “The press are gathering for their daily hounding.”

Agatha thought quickly. “I’d better start by dealing with them. Have you a room I could put them in with lots of drinks?”

“There’s one downstairs off the hall. But...”

“Have you a prescription for those sleeping pills?”

“Yes, it’s in my desk.”

“Let me have it and leave the vultures to me. Wait a bit. The housekeeper was away. Why didn’t Bliss hear anything?”

“He sleeps on the top floor and keeps a noisy fan running all night because of the heat.”

* * *

Half an hour later, seven reporters clutching various glasses of liquor looked up as Agatha marched into the room.

Agatha felt her courage draining away. She somehow could not find her voice. She looked at the press and they looked at her.

“Are you the maid, or what?” demanded one voice.

A spurt of humiliation helped Agatha find her voice. The maid, indeed. She’d show them.

“I have some news for you,” said Agatha. “I represent Sir Bryce Teller. I am head of the Agatha Raisin Public Relations Agency. On the night of the

murder, he had taken a heavy dose of barbiturates, which is why he did not hear a thing. His doctor is Giles Friend, three doors down. You can check. Here is the prescription. Examine it and let me have it back. Now, if you want any more titbits from me, you will need to play nice and stop crucifying the man."

"How can we contact you?" asked the man from the *Daily Mail*.

As Agatha hesitated, the door opened and Bliss came in. He handed her a box of business cards. Agatha stared at them in delight. How had he managed it so quickly? But they looked like the cheap ones which could be got from a machine in one of the stores in Oxford Street. She passed them around.

"That will be all for today. Except Mr. Rothmore. Just a word in your ear."

When the others had left, Jerry said, "Yeah, what?"

"I am sure you would not want your wife to know about Cynthia," said Agatha.

He stared at her, appalled. "You wouldn't!"

"Write something nice and I won't. Otherwise, I damn well will. Now, push off."

* * *

When Agatha returned to the sitting room, George South, Bryce's man of business, was waiting for her. He told her to come round to his office in Hinde Street close by so that she could sign the necessary paperwork. He was a pleasant, friendly man, almost bald, and impeccably dressed. Agatha could feel a clutch of pure fright in her stomach. How could she, at her young age, run her own company? A trapped bluebottle buzzed against the window, looking for escape. Agatha sympathised with it, feeling trapped herself.

When all the business was finished, Agatha longed to escape and treat herself to a gin and tonic and a cigarette, but the offices had to be examined and the keys handed over. Her new kingdom was over a jeweller's shop. It consisted of five rooms. George strode through them, writing in a notebook. "You'll need desks, computers, and stationery, things like that. But leave it all to me." When he finally left, Agatha locked up and walked to South Audley Street and began collecting her file on the press and her other belongings.

"What the hell are you doing?" shouted Jill.

"I'm getting out of your slave labour camp," said Agatha.

"You can't!"

"You didn't give me any contract," said Agatha. "You said, 'If you don't match up, I can fire you any time I like.' So, get this, horse-face, I'm firing you!"

* * *

Bryce was beginning to regret the impulse that had made him want to set up Agatha in business. But he had used his business acumen to set up other people before and had never been wrong in his judgement. The next morning, he asked to see all the newspapers. He began to smile. They had all covered the fact that he had taken sleeping pills and the surprise came in the *Sketch*, where Jerry had also written a fulsome report of all his charity work and stated it was time the police looked elsewhere.

* * *

Agatha Raisin walked around her new offices in South Molton Street and felt quite sick with elation. George South called again. An account had been opened for her and she had been given a credit card. George South had even employed a secretary for her, a woman called Freda Demer, middle-aged, quiet, and polite.

"Put advertisements in all the newspapers for public relations officers. I need two to start, and an office boy. I have been told to pay well."

"Yes, Miss Raisin."

"You may call me Agatha. Now, where do I go from here? Snakes and bastards. If only I could find out who actually murdered his wife. Get me Sir Bryce Teller."

When he came on the phone, Agatha excitedly cut short his thanks. "When your late wife went out in the evenings, how did she go? Taxi?"

"No, we used a limo service. Mayfair Limos. Usual driver Peter Black. You'll find their garage in Clarges Mews. What are you after?"

"Finding out where she went. May I also speak to your housekeeper?"

"She resigned."

"Did she, now. Where does she live?"

"Wait a minute and I'll find her address." Agatha waited impatiently. At last he came back on the line. "Here it is. Bertha Jones, 201A Mill Hill East High Street."

I must stop wearing such high heels, thought Agatha, as she strode along the High Street an hour later, feeling her ankles beginning to swell in the heat. She located the housekeeper's address, which was in a basement flat under a betting shop.

"Bertha Jones?" she demanded, as a plump, grey-haired woman answered the door.

"I ain't talking to no press," she said, and began to close the door.

Agatha shoved her foot in it. "I'm not the press. I am representing Sir Bryce Teller. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she shouted.

"I got nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes, you have. Walking out on your boss when he needed you most."

The door opened again. "It was my Bert, my husband," said Bertha. "He made me leave. 'You'll be next,' he kept saying."

"Well, he was wrong. If you look in this morning's newspapers, you'll find that Sir Bryce took sleeping pills and so didn't hear a thing."

"You'd better come in. I'm that shook up."

Agatha followed her into a living room which was chilly and damp as if summer had shunned it. It was neat and comfortably furnished, though. "What I really want to know," said Agatha, "is what Lady Teller was like."

"I don't like to speak ill of my employers," said Bertha primly.

"They're not your employers anymore and you damned poor Sir Bryce by walking out on him. Come on. Let's have it. Warts and all."

"Sit down," said Bertha, collapsing into an armchair. "She was a slut, that's what. Threw her dirty clothes on the floor for me to pick up and launder. Never gave me nothing for Christmas except insults."

"Do you know if she was having an affair?"

"I don't. But she went out on her own a lot and didn't come back till the small hours. You make me feel that ashamed. I wish I'd never left."

"Want your job back?"

"I would. I told Bert he'd made me go and I'd never forgive him."

"Got a phone?"

"Over by the window."

Agatha phoned Bryce and said, "I am sending you your housekeeper."

"Well, I'm not employing her again."

"Yes, you are," said Agatha. "I've got to have something to tell the press. Ashamed housekeeper returned to the best boss she ever had. 'I am

that ashamed,' she said yesterday."

"Oh, all right."

Agatha rang off and turned to Bertha. "Get your things. It's too hot. I'm damned if I'll getting on that train to King's Cross again. We'll take a cab."

* * *

Having deposited Bertha and ordered a delivery from Selfridges, Agatha returned to the office and began to phone round the newspapers about the return of Bertha, finishing with "'Mrs. Teller was a slut,' she sobbed."

"Now, for that garage. Go home, Freda."

"I'll stay on if you like."

"No, I'll see you in the morning. You look tired." Agatha opened the petty cash and fished out some notes. "Here. It's too hot for the tube. Take a cab."

Ignoring Freda's gratitude, Agatha said good-bye and went downstairs.

* * *

She was in luck at the garage. Peter Black had just come in for a job. At first, he curtly told Agatha that he did not discuss clients, but then she let her handbag fall open to reveal it was stuffed with notes. "Let's go for a drink," she said. "What about the Ritz?"

Peter Black was tall and rangy, with a foxy face and thick brown hair. He was never to know the courage Agatha had to sum up to walk into the bar of the Ritz without any apparent qualm. He ordered whisky and soda and Agatha collected a gin and tonic for herself and guided them to a small table.

"I'll pay you for information," she said. "I represent Sir Bryce Teller. So, where did Lady Teller go?"

"The Pink Lady."

"What's that?"

"A club in Charlotte Street."

Agatha thought quickly. The colour pink was often a favourite of homosexuals. "A lesbian club, by any chance?"

"Yeah. You going to give me the money or what?"

"Not yet. So, did she go there on the night of her murder?"

"Yes. I dropped her off, but she never rung for me, see? Must ha' got a cab."

"So, let's say she was a lesbian. Ever see her with a woman?"

“Naw. She’d take the limo there but never got me to pick her up. I think she switched both ways. Drunk one night and come on to me. Didn’t bite. I like Sir Bryce Teller. Real gent. Sorry for him. Money?”

“Another minute. Did the police interview you?”

“Naw.”

Agatha handed over a bundle of notes and sent him on his way.

She looked dreamily about her. Here she was. In the Ritz! *Blimey*.

Agatha became aware that a tall, handsome man at the next table was smiling at her. He was about six feet tall with thick black hair and intense blue eyes. She smiled cautiously back.

He came over to her table and sat down. “What’s a pretty girl like you doing on her own?” he asked.

“I am a public relations executive,” said Agatha proudly. “I have just been dealing with some business.”

“I’m Colin Fitzwilliam. Hullo.”

“And what do you do?” asked Agatha, feeling she had walked through the looking glass into this strange world where it seemed natural to chat in the Ritz with a handsome man with an Etonian accent.

“I’m in the Household Cavalry. Off-duty. Look, why don’t we get together later? Have a drink and chat? I feel like a night out.”

“All right,” said Agatha cautiously. “Where?”

“What about Jules Bar in Jermyn Street at eight o’clock?”

Agatha grinned. “See you there.”

She dreamily watched as he was leaving. A porter waylaid him and said something. He looked startled, glanced back at Agatha, and then hurriedly left.

* * *

When she returned to her office, Freda was still there. “Why haven’t you gone home?” asked Agatha.

“I thought I would wait for you because just as I was leaving, that big parcel arrived. You’ve got a delivery from Selfridges. And you said something about a press conference tomorrow and I wondered if you wanted me to go with you?”

“Yes. Fine. Now, off you go!”

After she had left, Agatha unwrapped the large package. It contained an airbed, duvet, pillows, and bed linen. She hauled them into a small room at the back of the office where she had placed two suitcases containing all

her belongings from Acton. It never dawned on Agatha that Bryce and his business manager expected her to spend lavishly with the funds at her disposal and that would include a flat in central London. She pumped up the airbed, arranged the bed linens. With Agatha, the habits of thriftiness died hard. Then she checked Freda's computer. All the press were invited to a conference at Bryce's at ten-thirty in the morning. Agatha did not want them round at her office until she had a full staff.

A little voice of caution was telling her not to be a fool and to phone Jules Bar at eight and say she could not make it. She had allowed herself to be picked up. But Agatha was easily seduced by what she considered as posh.

So, at eight o' clock on the dot, she entered Jules Bar, found a table, and sat nervously waiting ... and waiting.

Over in his home in Kensington, Colin cursed himself for having nearly forgotten his wife's dinner party. That little girl would be waiting in Jules Bar. Oh, well. Hard luck.

* * *

Agatha left the bar at eight-thirty feeling very young and vulnerable. She bought herself a sandwich and coffee before returning to the office and preparing for bed. She had found, to her relief, that the offices boasted a shower as well as a toilet. She fished two towels and a bar of soap out of one of her suitcases, showered, and finally rolled into bed. The airbed let out a sound like a loud fart. Agatha hoped the gods were not pronouncing judgement on one overambitious girl and then fell asleep.

II

The room in Wigmore Street set aside for the press conference was full to overflowing. Bertha sat nervously in an armchair facing them, her plump face lit up by the lights from the television cameras.

Bertha tried to speak and then burst into tears. Agatha handed her a box of tissues and hissed, "Pull yourself together!"

Bertha gulped and said in a weak voice, "I'm that ashamed. How I could believe that a fine man like my boss could murder anyone? He's forgiven me, and God bless him."

"What was your opinion of the late Lady Teller?" asked a reporter.

Bertha popped on her glasses and peered down at a piece of paper on which Agatha had written out what she must say.

"I don't want to speak ill of the dead," she said. "But she was something cruel. Always bitching and complaining and treating my boss like dirt. Hardly ever home in the evenings."

Agatha immediately regretted writing that bit about "treating my boss like dirt." Talk about broadcasting a motive!

Time to make the vultures really sit up and take notice.

"According to a reliable source," she said, "Lady Teller frequented a lesbian club. But came on to men as well as women."

"Which club?" shouted several voices.

"I will let you know when I have completed my enquiries," said Agatha.

"Shouldn't you be leaving that to the police?" demanded a woman reporter.

"Why?" demanded Agatha. "So far, they have tunnel vision. I have not. That will be all, ladies and gentlemen."

Ignoring further questions, she ushered Bertha from the room, followed by Freda, and then escaped into the downstairs toilet and burst into tears. Agatha was beginning to feel the strain. Underneath was the sensitive girl trying to match up to the hard exterior. She washed her face and carefully made up her face.

Freda was waiting anxiously outside with the business manager, George

South.

"I've been to your office, Agatha," he said. "We cannot go on holding press conferences here. I found a makeshift bed in one of the rooms. Why haven't you got a flat?"

"I was waiting until I earned enough to justify renting one near the office," said Agatha.

"You could easily have drawn on the funds at your disposal. Anyway, here's the key to a flat in a property Bryce owns in Chelsea. I suggest you move there as quickly as possible."

Agatha stammered out her thanks and then asked, "May I see Bryce?"

"He is in hospital for a checkup."

"What's up with him?"

"That is for him to tell you."

In New Scotland Yard, right after the midday news had broadcasted the press conference, Chief Superintendent Mike Topping summoned Chief Detective Inspector Jim Macdonald and Detective Sergeant Fred Baxter.

"What the hell have you two been playing at?" he roared. "You're letting a slip of a girl no one's ever heard of before run rings round you."

Macdonald was a surly Scot. "It seemed a straightforward case," he said. "We're damn sure the husband did it."

"Get over to that Raisin girl's office and grill her. For a start, who is this source and what's the name of this damned club?"

* * *

As Freda and Agatha finished lunch, Freda said, "I have a feeling the police will be waiting for you at the office, Agatha."

"Why?"

"That conference will have been screened on the midday news. They'll have a lot of questions for you."

Agatha clutched her hair. "I never thought of that. I'd like to get to that club this evening first."

"It might be a good time to look at your new flat," said Freda.

"Good idea. I hope it's furnished."

* * *

The flat was in a block in Sloane Square. The porter was expecting Agatha and told her the flat was on the second floor. They took the lift up. Agatha inserted the keys in the two locks and swung the door open.

The thickly carpeted narrow passage had rooms off it to the right and left. Agatha wandered through them in a daze. There was a sitting room, dining room, kitchen, bathroom, three bedrooms, and a toilet near the door for guests. It was fully furnished and fully equipped. Freda burst out laughing as Agatha executed three cartwheels down the corridor.

"I just hope all this doesn't fade like fairy gold," said Agatha. "Where do you live, Freda? I've forgotten."

"Out at Edgeware."

"Rented?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you move in here? Keep your own flat on in case you can't bear living with me. If it works out, you can live here rent free."

She then ignored Freda's stammered thanks and said, "I daren't go back to the office to get clothes for tonight. I'd better hit the thrift shops and hope they've something glamorous."

"Agatha, George is puzzled at your thrift. Go to Bond Street and buy some Armani or something."

"Maybe."

At ten o' clock that summer evening, Agatha paid off a cab in front of the Pink Lady. Two powerful-looking female bouncers were guarding the door. They looked Agatha up and down. She was wearing a very short, very low-cut gold spangled dress and high-heeled gold leather strapped sandals. She had shopped at a little boutique in Notting Hill, balking at the idea of wasting money. The one big expense was the shoulder-length blond wig on her head.

"Are you a member?" asked one of the bouncers.

"No, but I'd like to join," said Agatha.

"Fifty pounds, and pay at the desk inside."

They opened the door and ushered Agatha in. The club was in a basement. Agatha paid for her membership and walked down the stairs. Eyes turned in her direction. Women were dancing with women. Most of them looked glamorous. Dear me, thought Agatha cynically. Homosexual men looked after their appearances and were often handsome. Does being heterosexual mean being frumpy? Agatha went to the bar and ordered a gin and tonic. "My friend, Nigella, the one that was murdered, told me about this place," said Agatha. "Have one yourself."

"Thanks," said the woman behind the bar. She looked as tough as the bouncers.

Agatha began to hope no one would recognise her from the television news and was glad she was wearing a wig.

“Nigella was frightfully keen on someone. She here tonight?”

“Hetty Clarkson was her latest squeeze. Over there in the white dress.”

Agatha twisted round on her bar stool. Hetty was tall and slim with long dark hair. Agatha thought she might be in her thirties. She stared at Agatha, who flashed her a radiant smile.

Hetty said something to her companion and then rose and joined Agatha at the bar. A revolving crystal ball on the ceiling sent sparks of light shining from Agatha’s dress.

“Drink?” offered Agatha.

“I’ll have a daiquiri.”

Agatha ordered it but decided to nurse her gin and tonic. “New in town, are you?” asked Hetty.

Agatha reverted to her old Birmingham accent. “Not long arrived from Birmingham. It’s all so glamorous.”

“Which clubs did you go to in Birmingham?” Hetty asked.

“Didn’t,” said Agatha. “Too scared. I lived with mum and dad, see? That’s why I moved here.”

The music swung into “Strangers in the Night.” “Dance?” asked Hetty.

“In a mo,” said Agatha.

“So, how did you hear about this club?”

“Advertisement in *Time Out*,” said Agatha, hoping desperately that the club had advertised in the magazine.

“I’m Hetty Clarkson. “What’s your name?”

“Agatha Demer,” said Agatha, borrowing Freda’s second name.

To her horror, the woman behind the bar said to Hetty, “She’s a friend of Nigella’s.”

Hetty had black eyes, the sort of eyes that do not reflect the owner’s thoughts. “My, my,” she said, “and how did a little Brummie girl like you meet Nigella?”

Fear lent Agatha’s imagination wings. “It was one of her husband’s charity parties. I had an evening job as a waitress. Nigella and I got talking and she was so sympathetic and, after the party, she asked me to go to a bar with her for a drink. We ended up spending the night together. It was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.”

“And the bitch never said a word to me,” hissed Hetty. “Said I was her one and only. Mind you, I found out that was a load of bollocks.”

“Are you sure?” asked Agatha, hoping the music would never stop because it was covering any noise that might be coming from the large tape recorder in her bag. “She was ever so sweet. A real lady.”

Hetty seemed to relax. “You *are* a little innocent, aren’t you?” She put her hand on Agatha’s knee. Agatha fought down a desire to run away.

“Now, we dance,” said Hetty.

But to Agatha’s relief, the smoochy music stopped and The Village People began to belt

out “Y.M.C.A.” So Agatha was able to bop, sway, and dance a foot away from Hetty.

Hetty eyed up that young body and those long, long legs. When the dance was over, she said, “Too noisy here. Let’s go back to my place.”

Agatha hesitated only a moment. “Okay.”

* * *

In an unmarked car outside the Pink Lady, detectives Macdonald and Baxter wondered what to do next. The bouncers had told them that they could not enter without a warrant. “We’ve been round three les clubs already,” moaned Macdonald.

“Here come a couple of them,” said Clarkson. “Hey, that blonde. Give me that photo of the Raisin girl.”

“Not good. We shot it off the telly.”

“I swear that’s her in a blonde wig. Let’s get her.”

“No,” said Clarkson. “Let’s follow and see what the bitch is up to now.”

* * *

The taxi bearing Agatha and Hetty stopped at a block of flats in Victoria. Hetty led the way into a spacious flat decorated in the minimalist style with everything in black-and-white except for two large rubber plants in the sitting room and a large abstract painting on one wall.

Agatha had suffered a tongue down her throat in the cab. Her knowledge of sex was pretty limited, Jimmy Raisin belonging to the fumble, fumble, and pass out school unless sober, when it was wham, bang, snore. What did lesbians do? Maybe with any luck, just kiss and cuddle.

“I’m going to watch telly in the lounge,” said Hetty. “The kitchen’s on the right. Fix me a brandy, there’s a darling. The bottle’s on the counter.”

I thought she would have a bar in her sitting room. And to think, I was told

that “lounge” was common. Wonder where her money comes from. With all this swirling in her head, Agatha reached for the brandy bottle and then stopped short. Lying on the counter was a round of cheese and beside it, a cheese cutter, a thin wire with two wooden handles.

“What’s keeping you?” called Hetty.

“Can’t find the glasses.”

“Bring the bottle. The glasses are in here.”

Agatha froze on the threshold. The room was dominated by a large television set, and, there on the screen was herself, facing the press.

Hetty bounded from the couch and snatched the wig from Agatha’s head. Then she slapped her across the face. “Get out! You dirty little sneak!” she yelled.

Agatha dropped the brandy on the floor and fled. She rushed down the stairs and was nearly at the bottom when she was met by the porter. “It’s something to do with you, miss,” he said, “Two men tried to get in, saying they were police. I asked them if they had a warrant and when they said no, I asked them to wait outside. Actually, they don’t need a warrant to get in and knock on the door, but they said to call them when you were leaving. They wanted to go up to Mrs. Clarkson’s apartment. There is a back way out of here.” He discreetly held out his hand. Agatha stuffed notes from her bag into it.

“Show me,” said Agatha.

He led her along a corridor and out into a yard filled with garbage bins. He took out a ring of keys and unlocked a high back gate. Agatha found herself out in a side road and by some miracle, a cab with its light on came cruising along. She hailed it and gave directions to her new flat. Agatha knew she should not avoid the police, but the days of her upbringing had made her terrified of them. Her father had been arrested many times for drunk and disorderly and her mother for shoplifting.

Before going to sleep, she phoned the Associated Press and dictated a statement that a Mrs. Hetty Clarkson had been the last person to see Lady Teller alive after leaving the Pink Lady club with her. It would be too late for the morning papers but radio and television would broadcast it.

* * *

In the morning, she pulled the clean clothes she had worn the day before out of the washer dryer and put them on. The soles of her feet throbbed, the result of wearing high heels the previous evening.

Freda came into the kitchen while Agatha was drinking coffee. Agatha thanked her for stocking up on groceries and told her to take the money out of the petty cash in the office and then wearily told her of her adventures.

“You must go straight to the police!” exclaimed Freda.

“Not yet. I think I’ll go round to Bryce and tell him.”

“If the police call at the office, what will I tell them?”

“Oh, tell them where I am. I might need Bryce to find me a lawyer. They might try to charge me with withholding evidence or something like that.”

* * *

What a summer! When Agatha left it was still early in the morning but the sun was already very hot. She hailed a taxi and leaned back in the seat, feeling tired and nervous and again, completely out of her depth. It had all happened so quickly. It seemed as if one minute she was dogsbody, Agatha Raisin, and the next with her own company and in the middle of a murder investigation. At Wigmore Street, she paid off the cab. Agatha’s thrift did not run to economising on cabs in a hot summer.

Bliss answered the door and said that the master was in the hospital for tests. “What is really up with him?” demanded Agatha.

“He won’t say,” said Bliss. “Mrs. Jones is out at the moment. I would like a word with you. We could have a coffee in the kitchen.”

Seated over mugs of coffee, Bliss began. “It was kind of you to get Mrs. Jones her job back, but that could be a mistake. She could be insolent and the boss was thinking of firing her, but Lady Teller always defended Bertha.”

“But Bertha trashed her at the press conference! And Bertha seems so genuine and motherly.”

“I think that’s one big act. Also, she had lost her protector. No need to be nice about her. There’s another thing. Lady Teller lost a diamond brooch and the police were called. They found it in Bertha’s room but Lady Teller said she had forgotten she had given it to Bertha.”

Agatha bearlike eyes stared at his face. “Blackmail,” she said. “Bertha knew all about Nigella being a lesbian, and she may have known all about her lovers.”

They both heard a key turning in the front door. “She’s back,” said Bliss. “I’ve got to get the newspapers for the boss.”

Agatha remembered the tape recorder was still in her bag. She hurried through to the sitting room, switched it on, and put it behind the sofa. Bertha came in with two heavy shopping bags and headed for the kitchen. "Morning," she said. "Get you a coffee?"

"I've just had one," said Agatha. "Why don't you get one yourself and join me?"

"Wouldn't mind taking the weight off me feet, duckie. The heat's right crool."

Agatha waited nervously. She had always prided herself on her intuition, her ability to sum people up. How on earth had she not seen through Bertha's act? Or maybe Bliss was the guilty one and dishing the dirt on the housekeeper as a smoke screen.

At last Bertha returned bearing a tray with coffee and cakes. She sank down in an armchair opposite Agatha. "That's better. You found out anything else?"

"I went to the Pink Lady and met Hetty Clarkson."

"I know that trollop. My lady sneaked her back here one night when Sir Bryce was away."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Told you. Loyalty is the thing."

Agatha took a deep breath. Why not just plunge in? "I happen to know you were blackmailing Lady Teller," she said.

"Who told you that?"

"No one. An educated guess. I am going round to New Scotland Yard and tell them of my suspicions and they will dig and dig until they get to the truth."

"You are a silly little girl," said Bertha. "You can smear my name all you like. I've got nothing to hide. You've overstayed your welcome. Push off. I got an alibi. I was with me sister in Dorset."

Agatha got to her feet. No chance of retrieving her tape recorder. "You haven't heard the last of this," she said.

She walked to the door of the sitting room. Agatha realised a strap of her sandals was coming loose and bent down to fix it. The coffee jug which had been about to smash down on her head struck her on the shoulder instead.

Agatha screamed, "Help!" at the top of her voice as she turned round to grapple with the housekeeper. That was her mistake. This time the coffeepot struck her full on the forehead. She collapsed, unconscious, on

the floor.

* * *

Outside, Chief Detective Inspector Jim Macdonald was raising his hand to ring the bell.

He paused. "I heard someone scream." Behind him crowded the press.

Bliss appeared behind him with a pile of newspapers. "Open the door," ordered Macdonald.

Bliss and Macdonald rushed in to where Agatha was lying on the floor. Macdonald felt for a pulse. "She'll live. What's going on here? Bliss, get an ambulance, quick."

Bertha appeared, stuffing something in her apron pocket. "I was protecting meself," she said. "She went mad and attacked me. I had to hit her with the coffeepot."

Agatha's eyes fluttered open. Bliss bent down and put an ice-cold compress on her forehead. "The tape recorder," she whispered. "Behind the sofa."

"What's she saying?" shouted Bertha. "All lies. How can you believe a stupid girl like that?"

"Miss Raisin says there's a tape recorder hidden behind the sofa," said Bliss.

Bertha let out a squawk and made a run for the front door but was borne back by the press, who had decided to follow the police in.

Detective Sergeant Fred seized her and put her in handcuffs.

The ambulance arrived as Bliss was helping Agatha to sit up. "No," said Agatha to the paramedics. "I must hear what was on that tape."

It was switched on. The detectives listened grimly to Agatha's accusations. Then there was a long silence after she had been hit on the head. Just as they had decided there was nothing more, they heard Bertha's voice again. "Got a nice bit of cheese wire for you, duckie. I'll hide your body in my room until I decide where to dump you. Pin it on the boss somehow." Then came the noises of Macdonald and Fred bursting in.

Cameras clicked as Bertha was charged with the attempted murder of Agatha Raisin and Agatha was put on a stretcher and borne off to hospital.

* * *

Later that day, Macdonald and Baxter were summoned to the office of Chief Superintendent Baxter.

“Bertha Jones has finally admitted to murdering Lady Teller,” said Macdonald. “We are waiting until Agatha Raisin is fully recovered and we will charge her with impeding a police investigation and perverting the course of justice.”

“You idiots! She’s the heroine of the day. The press office will issue a statement expressing their gratitude. Have you realised if Sir Bryce Teller had not had such a high standing and a good lawyer, you would have charged him? On what? We’ll slant the press statement to take most of the credit, which you pair don’t deserve. This Bertha was supposed to be in Dorset. Didn’t you check her alibi?”

“Yes,” said Macdonald. “But her sister swore she was there all the time. Bertha’s cracked. She said Lady Teller was very drunk the evening before and she had kept a couple of Bertha’s blackmailing notes and was going to show them to her husband who had been complaining about her extravagance. Lady Teller said she would be fired. Bertha claimed that she had kept all the money and jewellery and would give it all back when she returned from Dorset so Lady Teller agreed to wait. So Bertha bought another cheese wire, planning to pin the murder on the husband. She phoned her sister and got her to agree to say she was with her the whole time. She waited across the road until she saw Lady Teller returning, let herself in, and killed her. So we’ve wrapped up the case.”

“You mean, Agatha Raisin’s wrapped it up. Get out of here!”

“I hate that Raisin girl,” muttered Macdonald in the corridor outside, not knowing then that he was only echoing what in later years a lot of detectives and police officers would feel as they wondered how Agatha Raisin could solve cases by apparently blundering about like some demented wasp.

* * *

Agatha was told later that day by a neurosurgeon that she had, luckily, a very hard head and she was to be allowed visitors. Agatha had been interviewed all that morning by the police but the surgeon did not classify them as visitors, only as some sort of necessary evil. The first was Freda, bearing a bunch of grapes.

“So exciting,” she said. “George South said you were obviously not ready to hire staff so he’s hired a couple of PR assistants for you. Some firms are already showing interest.”

Agatha suddenly felt young and weak and lost. How could she cope

with running a Mayfair PR company?

She was on the verge of tears when Jill Butterfrick sailed into the room behind a large bouquet of roses. “Darling, Agatha,” she cooed. “Quite the heroine! I have great news for you. You are to come back to us as our top PR.”

Agatha could feel somewhere inside her a healthy glow of rage. She remembered all the bullying. Loudly and clearly, Agatha said, “As we used to say back at the buildings, take a hike.”

“What did you say?” Jill looked around the room as if hoping someone else had said that.

“Sod off, you dreary cow!” roared Agatha.

Jill flushed scarlet. “Why, you cheeky bitch. I’ll ruin you.”

She grabbed her roses and stormed off.

When she had gone, Agatha grinned and said, “I enjoyed that. I’m a bit tired, Freda. I have had such a long morning giving statements to the police.”

“I’ll get back to the office,” said Freda.

“Wait a bit. I thought Bryce would call.”

Freda hesitated and then said, “It’s bad news. I was going to tell you when you were better.”

“Out with it.”

“He’s got pancreatic cancer and he isn’t expected to live long.”

Agatha’s first selfish thought was that she could see the end of her dream. But that was followed by a surge of grief for the first person in her life who had been kind to her. Then she rallied. She would get out of this hospital and start work and try to make a profit while the money lasted. Somehow, she had to make it work. She owed it to Bryce.

“Where is he?” she asked.

“Harley Medical. It’s a private hospital in Harley Street.”

“Stay with me, Freda, and help me check out and we’ll get over there.”

“Oh, I brought your makeup,” said Freda. “The press are waiting outside.”

* * *

Although being carefully made up, Agatha looked frail and strained as she gave a statement to the press. Despite her new pugnacious manner, she was also learning diplomacy and said she wished to thank Chief Detective Inspector Macdonald and Detective Sergeant Fred Baxter for saving her

life.

She and Freda hailed a cab and went to Harley Street. Agatha forgot about her ambitions as she looked dismally at the now shrunken figure of Bryce in the hospital bed. He conjured up a smile. "You're a wonder, Agatha. The best PR in the world."

"I swear I'll work hard and try to pay back every penny," said Agatha, swallowing hard to try to get rid of the lump in her throat.

"That won't be necessary. The lot goes to my nephew, apart from a sum I have left you to cover your expenses for the next five years, and the flat and the office are yours. George will arrange the whole thing."

Agatha blurted out her thanks, but he waved a hand to dismiss them. "The thanks are all mine. Off you go. I'd like to sleep now."

Agatha finally reached her office and met her two new PRs, a woman called Jessie Rich and a young man named Sean Fitzgerald. George South was also waiting for her. Offers from clients were pouring in, he said. He would hire two more staff for her and after everything was set up, he would recommend a good accountant and a business manager.

"What about you working for me?" asked Agatha.

"Too expensive and plenty of clients on my books. I didn't only work for Bryce."

"I wish he could be cured," said Agatha. "Can nothing be done?"

"I'm afraid not."

* * *

Bryce died during the night. Agatha cried and cried when she got the news. At last Freda said bracingly, "The best thing you can do for his memory is to make a success of the business and you'll never do that if you fall apart."

So after the funeral, Agatha worked around the clock, representing a perfume manufacturer, a pop group, and various fashion houses. The sensitive girl she had once been became buried under a hard shell. Journalists, particularly those from the glossy magazines, had never come across a PR like Agatha before. She seemed to ferret out their weak spots and then play on them ruthlessly to get publicity for her clients.

Then one evening Freda said, "I think I should find a flat of my own."

"Why?" demanded Agatha.

Well, dear, you're young and it's time you had a boyfriend. You'll need a bit of space. Can't bring anyone back for a romantic evening with old me

sitting here.”

“Forget it. I’m through with men.”

But that night, before she went to sleep, Agatha dreamed of a tall, handsome man who would take over her heart and her life. Then her thoughts turned to Jimmy Raisin. Where was he now? She should do something about finding him so that she could get a divorce. She had been terrified that all the publicity about her would cause Jimmy to surface again.

Agatha would not admit to herself that she had become frightened of Jimmy’s drunken rages. It had been a whirlwind romance until reality had set in when Jimmy stopped his work as a plumber and took to drinking all day, expecting her to be the breadwinner. The first time he had used his fists on her, she had cried. The second time, she had hit him with a frying pan, packed up her belongings, flung the pile of Alcoholics Anonymous literature she had hopefully collected at him, and walked out of his life. Then she began to relax. If Jimmy had not put in an appearance, it stood to reason he was dead.

Perhaps Freda was right. She should find somewhere for Freda to live. Agatha was already beginning to make a lot of money over and above the large sum left to her by Bryce in his will.

* * *

In the morning, a new office boy with a white spotty face and his hair in a Mohawk dumped the mail on her desk. “There you are!” he said. He had a cockney voice and looked like a child.

“How old are you?” demanded Agatha. I don’t hire child labour.”

“I’m fifteen.”

What’s your name?”

“Roy Silver.”

“Well, Roy, you are now working in Mayfair, so look the part. See Freda and get some money. Take yourself to a hairdresser and get rid of that Mohawk.”

“But I’m just the office boy.”

Agatha’s eyes bored into him.

“Okay, boss. I’ll do it now.”

* * *

One Sunday, Agatha was strolling along the King’s Road. For once, she was

wearing jeans and a T-shirt and low-heeled sandals. She looked uneasily up at the darkening sky and wished she had brought an umbrella. Freda had said something about the good weather being about to break. Near The World's End, she stopped short in front of a shop with paintings displayed in the window. The one that caught her eye was of a thatched Cotswold cottage with tall hollyhocks at the gate. The sign on the door read CLOSED, but she could see someone moving about inside. Agatha rapped on the door.

The man approached and shook his head. Agatha pointed to the painting in the window and held up her hands in a praying gesture. He hesitated and then opened the door.

"I really want to buy that painting of the thatched cottage," said Agatha. "How much is it?"

"One hundred and fifty pounds. It is not by any known artist, so it is not expensive."

"I'll buy it!"

"Don't you want to examine it?"

"No, I'll take it now."

"Back in a minute." He went into a back room.

He swathed it in BubbleWrap and then carefully packaged it up in brown paper and string. There was a knock at the door. "My lunch date," he said, letting his friend in. "I'm in the back room, Larry."

In the back room, Geoffrey whispered, "I've sold that ghastly chocolate-box painting of a cottage. You know the one you said would never sell?"

"Is she American?"

"No. Funny, though. I've got this feeling I've seen her somewhere before."

They both came out and handed Agatha her parcel. She fished out her old credit card, hoping she had enough left in that account, for she could not feel justified in using the business money.

They all exited the shop together just as the rain poured down. The friend, Larry, unfurled a large golf umbrella and they both walked off without a backward glance.

Agatha stood in the doorway. "Pigs," she muttered. "They might at least have tried to find a cab for me."

* * *

In a restaurant across the road, Larry slapped his forehead. "I know who

she is. That girl. That's Agatha Raisin, Scary Agatha, the toughest PR in town. How much did you charge her?"

"A hundred and fifty pounds."

"It doesn't do to get on the wrong side of that one. Send her a fifty pound or something refund."

* * *

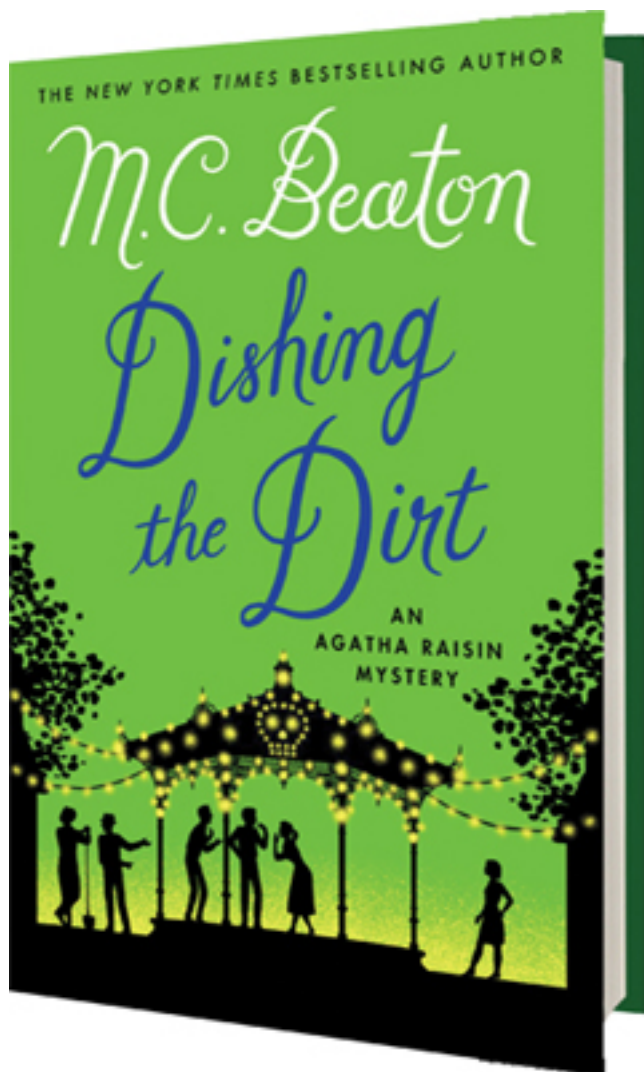
A blinding flash of lightning followed by a crack of thunder sent heavier rain cascading down as Agatha crouched in the doorway. She clutched her precious picture. One day, she would have a cottage just like the one in the painting. One day.

And holding the dream, she waited for the rain to stop.

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Chapter One

After a dismal grey winter, spring came to the village of Carsely in the Cotswolds, bringing blossom, blue skies and warm breezes.

But somewhere, in the heart of one private detective, Agatha Raisin, storms were brewing.

When Agatha had been a member of the now defunct Ladies Society, she had got to know all the incomers to the village. But as most of her time was taken up away from the village, she did not recognise the thin woman who hailed her one Sunday when she was putting out the trash, ready for collection.

“It is Mrs. Raisin, is it not?” she called out in a reedy voice.

Agatha came to the fence of her thatched cottage. “I am Victoria Bannister,” said the woman. “I do so admire you.”

Victoria was somewhere in her eighties with a long face and a long thin nose and large pale eyes.

“Oh, I just do my job,” said Agatha.

“But you have come such a long way from your poor beginnings,” said Victoria.

“What poor beginnings?” snarled Agatha. She had been brought up in a Birmingham slum and somehow always dreaded that somewhere, someone would penetrate her lacquer of sophistication and posh accent.

“I heard you came from such a bad start with drunken parents. I do so admire you,” said Victoria, her pale eyes scrutinising Agatha’s face.

“Piss off!” said Agatha furiously and went into her cottage and slammed the door.

Victoria walked off down Lilac Lane feeling happy. She enjoyed goading people.

* * *

Inside her cottage, Agatha stared bleakly at her reflection in the hall mirror. She had glossy brown hair and small bearlike eyes, a generous mouth, and although quite small in stature, had long well-shaped legs. Over the years, she had laminated herself with the right clothes, and the right accent. But deep down, she felt vulnerable. She was in her early

fifties which she reminded herself daily was now considered today's forties.

She knew her ex-husband, James Lacey, a travel writer, had just returned from abroad. He was aware of her background as was her friend, Sir Charles Fraith. Surely neither of them would have gossiped. She had challenged James before and he had denied it. But she had to be sure. That therapist, Jill Davent, who had moved to the village had somehow known of her background. James had sworn then he had never told her anything, but how else would the woman have known?

Agatha had visited Jill, prompted by jealousy because James had been seen squiring her around. She had told Jill a highly romanticised story of her youth, but Agatha had left in a fury when Jill accused her of lying.

"Any odd and sod can call themselves a therapist these days," she said to her cats. "Charlatans, the lot of them!"

* * *

She went next door to his cottage and rang the bell. James answered and smiled in welcome. "Come in, Agatha. I've got coffee ready. If you must smoke, we'll have it in the garden."

Agatha agreed to go into the garden, not because she particularly wanted to smoke, but because the inside of James's cottage with its bachelor surroundings always reminded her how little impact she had made on his life when they were married.

Blackbirds pecked at the shabby lawn. A magnolia tree at the bottom of the garden was about to burst into bloom, raising pink buds up to the pale blue sky.

James came out with two mugs of coffee and an ashtray.

"Someone's been gossiping about me," said Agatha. "It must be Jill Davent. Someone's found out about my background."

"I could never understand why you are so ashamed of your upbringing," said James. "What does it matter?"

"I matters to me," said Agatha. "The Gloucestershire middle classes are very snobby."

"Only the ones not worth knowing," said James.

"Like some of your friends? Did you tell anyone?"

"Of course not. I told you before. I do not discuss you with anyone."

But Agatha saw a little flash of uneasiness in his blue eyes. "You did say something about me and recently, too."

He ran his fingers through his thick black hair, hair that only showed a little grey at the temples. He cursed Agatha's intuition.

"I didn't say anything about your background but I took Jill out for dinner and she asked a lot of questions about you, but I only talked about your cases."

"She's counselling Gwen Simple. She knows I was on that case where I nearly ended up in one of her son's meat pies."

Agatha's last case had concerned a Sweeny Todd of a murderer over at Winter Parva. Although she suspected his mother, Gwen, of having helped in the murders, no proof was found against the woman.

"Actually, it was more or less on your behalf that I took not only Jill out for dinner, but Gwen as well."

Agatha stared at him, noticing that James with his tall, athletic body was as handsome as ever. Jill looked like a constipated otter, but there was something about Gwen Simple that made men go weak at the knees.

"So what did creepy, slimy Gwen have to say for herself?" she asked.

"Agatha! The poor woman is still very traumatised. Jill did most of the talking."

Gwen probably sat there with a mediaeval-type gown on to suit her mediaeval-type features, thought Agatha bitterly. That one doesn't even have to open her mouth. She just sits there and draws men in.

"So did Jill have anything to say about the case?" she asked. "And I thought Gwen had sold the bakery and moved."

"Jill naturally will not tell me what a client says," remarked James. "And Gwen has moved to Ancombe."

"I would have thought she would want to get as far away from Winter Parva as possible," said Agatha. "I mean, a lot of the villagers must think she's guilty."

"On the contrary, they have been most sympathetic."

"Tcha!" said Agatha Raisin.

* * *

Agatha decided to call on her friend, Mrs. Bloxby. She suddenly wondered why on earth this therapist should have gone to such lengths as to ferret out her background. As usual, the vicar's wife was pleased to see her although, as usual, her husband was not. He slammed into his study.

As Mrs. Bloxby led the way into the garden, Agatha poured out her worries. "I'll get you a glass of sherry," said Mrs. Bloxby soothingly.

As she waited for her friend to come back, Agatha felt herself beginning to relax. Over in the churchyard, daffodils were swaying in the breeze amongst the old gravestones. In front of her, a blackbird pecked for worms on the lawn.

Mrs. Bloxby returned with a decanter of sherry and two glasses. After she had finished pouring out the drinks, she said, "I find it most odd that Miss Davent should obviously have gone to such lengths to dig up your background. She must see you as a threat. And if she sees you as a threat, what has she got to hide?"

"I should have thought of that," said Agatha. "I'm slipping. And why bring her business to Carsely? Surely she would get more clients in town."

"I think she *makes* clients," said the vicar's wife.

"What do you mean?"

"For example, she called on me. She said it must be awful for me not to have had any children. That, you see, is a vulnerable spot. She was trying to draw me in so that I would decide to use her services. I told her I was very busy and showed her the door. Everyone has some weakness, some frailty. I do not want to spread gossip, but she has built up quite a client base. They come from villages round about as well as here. She is a very clever woman. You have been so outraged about her finding out about your background that you did not stop to wonder why she had targeted you in this way."

* * *

On Monday morning, Agatha's small staff gathered for a briefing. There was Toni Gilmour, blond, young and beautiful; Simon Black with his jester's face; ex-policeman Patrick Mulligan; Phil Marshall, gentle and white-haired; and her secretary, Mrs. Freedman.

Agatha had decided she had given up caring about her lousy background and so she told them that somehow Jill had gone out to target her and she wondered why. "We've got other work to do," she said, "but if you have any spare time, see what you can find out about her. Anyone these days can claim to be a therapist without qualifications. I can't remember if she had any sort of certificates on her walls."

"Why don't I just visit her and ask her why she is targeting you?" said Phil. "She'll deny it, but I could have a look around."

"Good idea," said Agatha.

"I'll phone now and see if I can get an appointment for this evening,"

said Phil.

“You’d better take sixty pounds with you,” said Agatha. “I’m sure that one will look on any visit as a consultation.”

* * *

Phil made his way to Jill’s cottage that evening, having secured an appointment for eight o’ clock. The cottage was on the road leading out of Carsely. It had formerly been an agricultural labourer’s cottage and was built of red brick, two storied, and rather dingy looking. Phil, who lived in Carsely, knew it had lain empty for some time. There was a small, unkempt garden in the front with a square of mossy grass and two laurel bushes.

The curtains were drawn but he could see that lights were on in the house. He rang the bell and waited.

Jill answered the door and looked him up and down from his mild face and white hair to his highly polished shoes.

“Come in,” she said. There was a dark little hall. She opened a door to the left of it and ushered him into her consulting room. Phil looked at the walls. He noticed there were several framed diplomas. The walls were painted dark green and the floor was covered in a dark green carpet. Jill sat behind a mahogany desk which held a Victorian crystal inkwell a phone and nothing else on its gleaming surface. There was a comfortable leather chair facing her and a standard lamp with a fringed shade in one corner, shedding a soft light.

Jill sat behind her desk and waved a hand to indicate he should take the seat opposite.

“How can I help you?” she asked. She had a deep, husky voice.

“I work for Agatha Raisin,” said Phil, “and it is well known in the village that you have been spreading tales about her poor upbringing. Why?”

“Because she wasted my time. Any more questions?”

“You are supposed to help people,” said Phil in his gentle voice. “You are not supposed to go around trying to wreck their reputation. Your behaviour was not that of a caring therapist.”

“Get the hell out of here!” screamed Jill with sudden and startling violence.

Phil rose to his feet, clutched his heart, grabbed the desk for support, and then collapsed on the floor.

“Stupid old fart,” said Jill. “Too damn old for the job. I’d better get an ambulance.” She picked up a phone from her desk and left the room.

Phil got quickly to his feet, took out a miniature camera and photographed the certificates on the wall before sinking back down to the floor and closing his eyes.

She returned and stared down at him. “With any luck, you’re dead,” she said viciously, and then left the room again. She had not even bothered to search for a pulse or even loosen his collar.

Phil got to his feet and moved quietly into the hall. He could hear Jill’s voice in the other room, but could not make out what she was saying.

He opened the front door and walked back down the hill. He would print the photos and e-mail them to Agatha’s computer.

* * *

Later that evening, Agatha decided to walk up to the local pub for a drink. As she left, she saw James welcoming Jill and felt a sour stab of jealousy.

In a corner of the pub were three blonde women the locals had dubbed “the trophy wives.” They were each married to rich men and were rumoured to be third or even fourth wives. They were left in the country during the week, each looking as if she were pining for London. They were remarkably alike with their trout-pout mouths, salon tans, expensive clothes, and figures maintained by strict diet and personal trainers.

Do women have trophy husbands? wondered Agatha. Perhaps, she thought ruefully, that now she had no longings for James, she wanted him to be kept single so that she could bask in his handsome company, a sort of “see what I’ve got” type of thing.

The pub door opened and Sir Charles Fraith strolled in, tailored and barbered, and almost catlike with his smooth blond hair and neat features. He saw Agatha, got a drink from the bar and went to join her.

“How’s things?” he asked.

“Awful.” Agatha told him all about Jill Davent.

“So she sees you as a threat,” said Charles. “What’s she got to be scared of?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” said Agatha. “I’m furious. Phil went there this evening and got some pics of her certificates. He’s sending them over.”

“I bet you’ve been playing into her hands by raging all over the place,” said Charles. “You’re an old-fashioned snob, Aggie. This is an age when

people who have risen from unfortunate beginnings brag about it all over the place.”

“I am not a snob” howled Agatha, and the trophy wives giggled.

“Oh, don’t laugh too hard,” snarled Agatha. “Your Botox is cracking.”

“You’re a walking embarrassment,” said Charles. “Let’s get back to your computer and look at those pictures.”

* * *

Agatha saw Charles’s travel bag parked in her hall and scowled. She often resented the way he walked in and out of her life, and sometimes, on rare occasions, in and out of her bed.

They both sat in front of the computer. “Here we are,” said Agatha. “Good old Phil. Let’s see. An MA from the University of Maliumba. Where’s that?”

“Africa. You can pay up and get a degree in anything. It was on the Internet at one time.”

“A diploma in aromatherapy from Alternative Health in Bristol. A diploma in tai chi.”

“Where’s that from?”

“Taiwan. The woman’s a phony, Agatha. Forget her.”

“I can’t, Charles. She’s counselling Gwen Simple and I swear that woman helped in those murders. I’d like to see her records.”

“Oh, let’s forget the dratted woman,” said Charles, stifling a yawn. “I’m going to bed. Coming?”

“Later. And to my *own* bed.”

* * *

Agatha would not admit that she was sometimes lonely, but she felt a little pang when Charles announced breezily at breakfast that he was going home.

For the rest of the week, she and her staff were very busy and had to forget about Jill.

But by the week-end, what the locals called “blackthorn winter” arrived, bringing squally showers of rain and sleet.

Agatha decided to motor to Oxford and treat herself to a decent lunch. Her cats, Boswell and Hodge, twisted around her ankles, and she wished she could take them with her.

She parked in Gloucester Green car park, wincing at the steep price and

began to walk up to Cornmarket. This is Oxford's main shopping street and one ignored in the Morse series, the producers correctly guessing that viewers wanted dreaming spires and colleges and not crowds of shoppers, and chain stores.

Agatha had initially planned to treat herself to lunch at the Randolph Hotel, but instead she walked into McDonald's, ignoring the cry from a wild-eyed woman of, "Capitalist swine." Agatha ordered a burger, fries and a black coffee and secured a table by looming over two students and driving them away. She wished she had gone to the Randolph instead. It was all the fault of the politically correct and people like that woman who had shouted at her, she reflected. It was the sort of thing that made you want to buy a mink coat, smoke twenty a day and eat in McDonalds out of sheer bloody-mindedness.

She became aware that she was being studied by a small, grey-haired man on the other side of the restaurant. When he saw Agatha looking at him, he gave a half smile and raised a hand in greeting.

Agatha finished her meal, and, on her road out, stopped at his table. "Do I know you?" she asked.

"No, but we're in the same profession," he said. "I'm Clive Tremund. I'd like to compare notes. Would you like to get out of here and go for a drink? What about the Randolph? I could do with a bit of posh."

Along Cornmarket, he talked about how he had recently moved to Oxford from Bristol to set up his agency.

In the bar of the Randolph, Agatha, who had taken note of his cheap suit, said, "I'll get the drinks."

"I'll be able to get you on my expenses," he said.

Agatha waited until the waiter had taken their order and come back with their drinks, and asked him what he had meant. "Never tell me I am one of your cases!"

"The only reason I am breaking the confidentiality of a client," said Clive, "is because the bitch hasn't paid anything so far and it looks as if she isn't going to."

"Would that bitch be a therapist called Jill Davent?"

"The same. I was supposed to ferret out everything I could about you. Got your birth certificate and took it from there."

"I'll kill her! Did she give a reason?"

"She said she was about to be married to a James Lacey, your ex. Said if you had got him to marry you, she might learn something by knowing

all about you.”

“I think it’s because she’s hiding something and wants to keep me away,” said Agatha.

“Don’t tell her I told you,” said Clive. “She may yet pay me, although I’ll probably have to take her to the Small Claims Court. She was one of my first clients.”

“Why did you leave Bristol?”

“Got a divorce. Didn’t want to see her with her new bloke. It hurts. Then I had to get my private detective’s licence.”

“I’ve just got one of those,” said Agatha. “How’s business?”

“Picking up. Missing students, students on drugs, anxious parents, that sort of thing.”

“What did you make of the Davent woman?”

“She seemed pretty straightforward, until I gave her the report on you, and then she was sort of gleeful in a spiteful way. I asked for my fee and she demanded more. She told me your first husband had been murdered and maybe the police had got it wrong and you did it yourself. I haven’t done anything about it. I sent her an e-mail, saying until she paid something, I couldn’t go on. She had an office in Mircester before she moved to Carsley.”

“I’ll pay your instead,” said Agatha. “Send me a written statement about the reasons she gave for employing you.” Agatha took out her cheque book. “I will pay you now.” She scribbled a cheque and handed it over.

“This is generous,” said Clive. “I’ll be glad not to see her again, except maybe in court. She gave me the creeps.”

* * *

As Agatha drove back to Carsely, she could feel her anger mounting. As she turned down into the road leading to the village and to Jill’s cottage, an elderly Ford was driving in the middle of the road. She honked her horn furiously, but the car in front continued on in the middle of the road at twenty miles an hour.

Victoria Bannister was the driver. She finally saw Agatha pull up outside Jill’s cottage, and stopped as well a little way down the road. Her long nose twitching with curiosity, Victoria decided to see if she could hear what Agatha was up to.

The window of Jill’s consulting room was open and Agatha’s voice

sounded out, loud and clear.

“How dare you hire a detective to probe into my life. Leave me alone or I’ll kill you. But before I murder you, you useless piece of garbage, I am going to sue you for intrusion of privacy.”

Said Jill, “And that will be a joke coming from a woman who earns her money doing just that.”

Agatha stormed out as Victoria scampered down the road to her car and this time, drove off at sixty miles an hour.

Chapter Two

Mrs. Bloxby had been worried ever since Agatha had told her all about Jill having paid a private detective to look into her background. The vicar's wife felt that Mrs. Raisin should simply have asked Miss Davent *why* she had gone to such lengths.

Two days after Agatha's confrontation with the therapist was clear and quite cold. The waxy blossoms of the magnolia tree in the vicarage garden shone against the night sky where that peculiar blue moon was rising, a blue moon everyone had been told was because of forest fire in Canada.

Mrs. Bloxby came to a sudden decision. She would visit this therapist and ask her herself.

Mrs. Bloxby put on her old serviceable tweed coat and set out to walk through the village and up the hill to Jill's cottage.

She rang the bell and waited. A light was on in the consulting room. Perhaps, thought Mrs. Bloxby, a consultation was in progress and the therapist had decided not to answer the door. But having come this far, she was reluctant to leave. She banged on the door and shouted, "Anyone there!"

Silence.

Mrs. Bloxby walked to the window of the consulting room and peered through a gap in the curtains. She let out a startled gasp. She could see a pair of feet on the floor but the rest was masked by a desk.

She went back to the door and tried the handle. The door was unlocked.

Mrs. Bloxby went straight to the consulting room and walked round the desk. The ghastly distorted face of Jill Davent stared up at her. A coloured scarf had been wound tightly round her neck.

The vicar's wife backed slowly away, as if before royalty. Her legs felt weak and she was beginning to tremble.

She made it outside and, fishing in her old battered leather handbag, took out her mobile phone and dialled 999.

It seemed to take ages for the police to arrive and she stood there while the pitiless blue moon rose higher in the sky.

Mrs. Bloxby let out a gulp of relief when she at last heard the

approaching sirens.

* * *

It was only when she was back at the vicarage, having given her preliminary statement and been hugged by her worried husband that she realised she should really phone Agatha Raisin.

Agatha was on her road home when Mrs. Bloxby phoned. Her first reaction was, "Oh, God! I threatened to kill her!"

"Did anyone hear you?" asked Mrs. Bloxby.

"No. I bet it was Gwen Simple. I swear that woman's a murderer."

As Agatha drove down into the village, she could see the police cars and ambulance and a little knot of villagers standing behind the police tape.

Her friend, Detective Sergeant Bill Wong, and Inspector Wilkes could be seen waiting outside the cottage for the forensic team to do their work. Agatha parked her car up the road and walked forward to join the crowd.

Victoria Bannister saw her approach and called out loudly, "There's the murderer. I heard her threatening to kill her."

Wilkes swung round, saw the contorted accusing face of Victoria and that she was pointing at Agatha.

"Wong," he said to Bill, "get that Raisin woman here and whoever that woman is who's accusing her."

* * *

How many weary hours I have spent in this interviewing room, having questions fired at me? thought Agatha dismally. She had been taken to police headquarters and Wilkes was interrogating her.

Over and over again, Agatha explained that she had found out that Jill had hired a private detective to ferret into her background and that had enraged her.

"I like my unfortunate upbringing to be kept quiet," she explained.

"You're a snob," said Wilkes nastily. "My father was a porter on the railroad and my mother worked in a factory. I'm proud of them."

"I am sure they were sterling people," said Agatha wearily, "but did *they* force you to work in a factory and then take your wages to buy booze? And did it ever cross your mind that she wanted to get me off her case? She was counselling Gwen Simple, for a start. And why did she leave Mircester?"

“That’s for us to find out and for you to keep your nose out of police business,” snapped Wilkes.

Agatha explained she had not left the office until eight o’ clock in the evening. She had stopped for petrol outside Mircester. Yes, she had the receipt.

Agatha looked to Bill for sympathy but his face was blank.

By the time she was allowed to go and told not to leave the country, Agatha was in a rage.

Mrs. Bloxby, who had driven her to police headquarters, got the full blast of Agatha’s tirade on the road back to Carsely. At last, when Agatha had paused for breath, she said mildly, “But what a great incentive to find out who murdered her. I am sure it would be a wonderful idea to get revenge on Mr. Wilkes.”

“Yes,” said Agatha slowly. “There must be something fishy in Jill’s background. I’ve asked that private detective of hers to detect for me.”

Mrs. Bloxby looked surprised. “Why did you do that? You have detectives of your own.”

“True,” said Agatha. “I did it on the spur of the minute, but I will need all the help I can get. You see, there suddenly seems to be a great amount of adultery going on, and much as I hate divorce cases, they pay well and we are all stretched to the limit. Now I know you don’t like to gossip, but I have to start somewhere. Who in Carsely has been consulting Jill?”

“I suppose there’s no harm in telling you. There is your cleaner, Mrs. Simpson.”

“What! Doris? She the sanest person I know. Anyone else.”

“I believe Miss Bannister went to see her.”

“That old cow. I could murder *her*.”

“Mrs. Raisin!”

“Well, she’s the reason I have been stuck in the police station half the night. Who else?”

“Old Mrs. Tweedy.”

“You mean the old girl who lives round the corner from the vicarage. What’s up with her?”

“Nothing more than loneliness, I should think,” said Mrs. Bloxby. Then she added reluctantly, “Mr. Lacey spent a great deal of time with Miss Davent. Of course, there were women from the other villages but I don’t know who they are.”

As Mrs. Bloxby turned the corner into Lilac Lane where Agatha lived,

they saw a car parked outside James's cottage. Bill Wong and detective Alice Peterson were just getting out of it. Bill saw Agatha and signalled to the vicar's wife to stop. "Don't go to bed yet," he said to Agatha. "I want to ask you a few more questions. Mrs. Bloxby, a minute of your time."

"Do you want me to come in with you?" asked Mrs. Bloxby as Agatha got out of the car at her cottage.

"No, you've done enough and thank you," said Agatha. She had a sudden impulse to hug Mrs. Bloxby, but resisted. Agatha Raisin, somehow, could not hug anyone—handsome men excepted.

Once inside her cottage, she slumped down on her sofa. The cats prowled around her hopefully. Agatha often forgot that she had fed them and would feed them again, but this time, she felt too tired to move.

Her eyes were just closing when she heard the imperative summons of her doorbell. She struggled to her feet, went to open it and stared bleakly at the two detectives.

Agatha led the way to the kitchen. "Have a seat and make it quick," she said.

"We've got to go over it again," said Bill soothingly. "You should know better than to go around threatening to kill people."

"I was exasperated," said Agatha. "How dare she hire a private detective to dig up my background?"

"We will be interviewing Clive Tremund," said Bill. "Begin at the beginning."

Agatha did not want to say again that she had initially lied to Jill about her upbringing. Tell a detective that you've lied about one thing and they might assume you're lying about everything else. She detailed the previous day. She had been working on a divorce case and had been out on it with Phil. He had the pictures to prove it. They then had both met with the client's lawyer and handed over the evidence. Agatha worked late, typing up notes on other outstanding cases, and, as she was heading home, that was when Mrs. Bloxby had called her.

"Why do you call Mrs. Bloxby by her surname?" asked Alice, when the interview was over.

"There was a society for women in this village when I arrived here," explained Agatha. "We all addressed each other by surnames and somehow it stuck. I know it's strange these days when every odd and sod calls you by your first name. But I rather like being Mrs. Raisin. I hate when in hospital nurses call me Agatha. Seems overfamiliar, somehow. And, yes,

it's ageing, as if they think I'm in my second childhood." She stifled a yawn.

"We'll let you get some sleep," said Bill.

When they had left, Agatha noticed that a red dawn was flooding the kitchen with light. She opened the garden door and let her cats out. The morning was fresh and beautiful. She went into the kitchen and got a wad of paper towel and wiped the dew off a garden lounger and then sank into it, sleepily enjoying the feel of the rising sun on her face and the smell of spring flowers.

She closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. Two hours later she was in the grip of a nightmare where she had fallen overboard from a ship, and as she struggled in the icy water, above her, Jill Davent leaned over the rail and laughed.

She awoke with a start to find the rain was drumming down and she was soaked to the skin. Agatha fled indoors and upstairs, where she stripped off her wet clothes, had a hot shower, pulled on a nightdress and climbed into bed.

* * *

Agatha awoke again in the early afternoon and reconnected her phone which she had switched off before falling asleep. She checked her messages. There were worried ones from her staff and several from the press.

She dressed and went wearily downstairs. Looking through a small opening in the drawn curtains in her front room, she saw the press massed outside her cottage. Agatha went upstairs and changed into an old T-shirt, jacket, loose trousers and running shoes.

Down again and out into the back garden, where she seized a ladder and propped it against the fence. She had somehow planned to heave the ladder up when she was straddled on the top of the fence but could not manage it. She was just about to give up and retreat when James appeared below in the narrow path which separated her cottage from his.

"I'll get my ladder," he called up to her.

If this were a film, thought Agatha grumpily, I would leap down into his strong arms. A watery sunlight was gilding the new leaves of the large lilac tree at the front of her cottage which mercifully screened her off from the press, who might otherwise have spotted her at the end of the passage.

James came through a side gate from his garden carrying a ladder

which he propped against the fence.

Agatha climbed down. She smiled up at James and then ducked her head as she realised she wasn't wearing make-up.

"Come in and have a coffee," said James. "But I really think you should have a word with the press, even if it's 'no comment' or they'll be here all day."

"In these clothes!"

"Agatha! Oh, all right. We'll climb back over, sort yourself out, and then go out to face them."

* * *

James waited impatiently in Agatha's kitchen for half an hour until she descended the stairs, fully made-up and teetering on a pair of high heels.

Agatha went out to face the press. She competently fielded questions while television cameras whirled and flashes went off in her face. Yes, she had spent a long time at police headquarters. Why? Because she was a private detective who lived in the village where the woman was murdered.

And then to her horror, Victoria Bannister pushed her way to the front. "You threatened to kill her!" she shrieked.

"Jill Davent hired a private detective to find out all about me," said Agatha. "I was annoyed with her. That is all. The question that arises is, why was she afraid of me? What had she got to hide?"

"You're a murderer," shouted Victoria.

"And you," said Agatha, "will be hearing from my lawyers. I am going to sue you for slander."

Victoria's wrinkled face showed shock and alarm. "I'm sorry," she babbled. "I made a mistake." She turned to escape, shouting at the press to let her through.

Agatha's voice followed her, "There one in every village."

And in that moment, Victoria could have killed Agatha. As she fled up to her cottage, she vowed to find out the identity of the murderer herself. She knew all the gossip of the village. Once inside, she poured herself a stiff sherry and went off into a rosy dream where *she* was facing an admiring press and telling them how she had solved the case.

* * *

"All done?" asked James as Agatha teetered back into the kitchen, sat down and kicked off her shoes.

“I think they’ve gone off to the vicarage to persecute Mrs. Bloxby.”

“Will she be able to handle it?”

“Oh, yes. A vicar’s wife has to be tough. In the past, she’s had to confront several women who developed a crush on her husband. It’s a lousy existence and she’s welcome to it. Half her time is acting as an unpaid therapist. A lot of people take their troubles to her.”

“Including you?”

“I’m her friend. That’s different. I’ll phone Toni to take over tomorrow. I think I’ll go into Oxford and talk to Clive.”

* * *

Clive Tremund’s office was in a narrow lane off Walton Street in the Jericho area of Oxford. It was situated in the ground floor of a thin two-storied building. Agatha tried the handle and found the door was unlocked.

There was a little square vestibule with a frosted glass door on the left bearing the legend TREMUND INVESTIGATIONS. She pushed open the door and went in.

Agatha let out a gasp. It was a scene of chaos. Papers were scattered everywhere. Drawers hung open at crazy angles. A filing cabinet had been knocked over onto the floor. She backed slowly out, took out her phone and called the police. Then she went outside to wait.

The cobbled lane was very quiet.

After only five minutes, a police car rolled to a stop and two policemen got out. Agatha quickly told them who she was, why she had called and what she had found. The police called it in. Another wait while two detectives arrived. Agatha had to make her statement again and was told to wait until a forensic team arrived.

The day was becoming darker and a damp gusty wind promised rain. Agatha retreated to her car and lit a cigarette, noticing that her fingers were shaking. Where was Clive? What had happened to him? She felt in need of support. Agatha noticed that neighbours were emerging from the surrounding houses. She phoned Toni and asked her to join her, saying, “Pretend to be a curious onlooker and question the neighbours before you come and talk to me.”

A forensic team arrived and suited up before going into the office. The morning dragged on. At last Toni arrived and Agatha could see her questioning the neighbours. Then Toni finally walked off and disappeared

around the corner into Walton Street Agatha fretted. Where on earth was she going?

After ten minutes, Toni returned, carrying a large brown paper bag. She slid into the passenger seat of Agatha's car.

"Coffee and sticky buns," said Toni, opening the bag.

"You're an angel. What did you get from the neighbours?"

"Not much. He lived upstairs."

"Oh, snakes and bastards!" howled Agatha. "I didn't even think to have a look. He could be lying dead up there."

"Don't think so. No ambulance. Have a bun."

"Ta. So what else?"

"Didn't speak to the neighbours. His clients mostly called in the evenings. Yesterday evening, one young woman, blond, slim, that's all of the description."

"Could be you," said Agatha gloomily.

"Two men at different intervals, both looking like middle-aged businessmen, one tall and thin and the other small and tubby. Not much to go on."

"I should have looked for a client list," mourned Agatha, "instead of rushing out to phone the police. But you know how it is, one fingerprint and they'd haul me in for breaking and entering. I'll come back when things have quietened down and try the next-door neighbours. The police are already knocking at doors."

"That's why I couldn't try them myself," said Toni. "All I could do was to pretend to be one of the crowd. Have another bun. They're very comforting."

"Oh, well, why not?"

There came a rapping on Agatha's window. The detective who had interviewed her earlier, said, "You are to come with me to Thames Valley Police to be interviewed. Leave your car here. An officer will drive you back. Who is this young lady?"

Oh, what is was to be young and beautiful, thought Agatha grumpily. The man's practically leering.

"Miss Toni Gilmour," said Agatha. "One of my detectives."

"She's better come with you. I don't want anyone messing up this crime scene."

Agatha made her statement again to a refreshingly young and efficient female detective. She was just about to leave when the ax fell. She was told that she had to recover her car and then drive to Mircester police headquarters and make another statement and Agatha knew that Wilkes's idea of an interview could run into hours.

There was no sign of Toni. Agatha got into her car and phoned her.

"I got chased away," said Toni. "I'll come back his evening, if you like."

"Let me think about that. Do you know if they've found Clive?"

"Not a sign of him. A friendly policeman told me his flat was empty before he got reprimanded."

"I hope to God he's all right," said Agatha. "I've got to go to Mircester to make another statement. I'll call you tomorrow."

Agatha knew the rush-hour traffic would be building up and so she decided to drive to the Botley road and exit Oxford by the ring road.

But as she got to the bottom of Beaufort Street, the traffic slowed to a stop and she could see police erecting a barrier.

She swung off into the Gloucester Green car park and then made her way on foot to the barrier. "I must get past," she said to a policeman on duty. "My train's about to leave," she lied, quickly thinking of an excuse to find out what had happened.

"All right. But keep clear of the police activity on the canal bridge. There are enough rubberneckers there already."

Agatha hurried down Worcester Street to Hythe Bridge Street. "What's up?" Agatha asked a man.

"Body in the canal," he said.

With a feeling of dread, Agatha elbowed her way to the front, ignoring angry protests. A weak sun was gilding the black waters of the canal. As Agatha watched, the sun shone down on the dead face of Clive Tremund as his body was dragged from the water.

She realised that if she was spotted by any detectives who had been at Clive's house then there would be more questions and so she shoved her way back through the crowd.

About the Author



M. C. BEATON, who was the British guest of honor at Bouchercon 2006, has been hailed as the “Queen of Crime” (*The Globe and Mail*). In addition to her *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling Agatha Raisin novels, Beaton is the author of the Hamish Macbeth series and four Edwardian mysteries. Born in Scotland, she currently divides her time between the English Cotswolds and Paris. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).

Author photo by Louise Bowles.



Also by M. C. Beaton

Agatha Raisin

Dishing the Dirt: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
The Blood of an Englishman: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Something Borrowed, Someone Dead: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Hiss and Hers: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
As the Pig Turns: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Busy Body: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
There Goes the Bride: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
A Spoonful of Poison: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Kissing Christmas Goodbye: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Love, Lies and Liquor: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
The Perfect Paragon: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
The Deadly Dance: An Agatha Raisin Mystery
Agatha Raisin and the Haunted House
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Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Part I

Part II

Preview of *Dishing the Dirt*

About the Author

Other Books by M. C. Beaton

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